

In Memoriam.

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The Mystic Circle —

of

Kate's Mountain.

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“Invoke we those bright Beings, one by one.”

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WEST, JOHNSTON & CO.

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IN MEMORIAM.

THE MYSTIC CIRCLE

OF

KATE'S MOUNTAIN

1860-1895.

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## DEDICATION.

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THIS reprint of an old society poem is affectionately inscribed to the memories of the dead, and to the friendships of the living, whom, upon a festive occasion, it was sportively attempted to portray in just profile of person and character: and with these, and this inscription, can but be associated one who is intimately connected by tender ties with some of the most prominent and dearly cherished of them all, and at whose suggestion this reprint is made, my attached sister, Mrs. Rebecca Williams Howard, of Baltimore. Haply, it may serve the more vividly to recall to the living the lineaments of the departed, and of each other, in the golden light of a beautiful day of pure and earnest enjoyment.



## PREFACE.

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IN the late summer of 1860, which presented the last brilliant assemblage at the Greenbrier White Sulphur Springs, then in Virginia, of the wealth and distinction, fashion and beauty of the Southern States and the Northern cities, representative of an unique civilization, now passed away forever, a party of young ladies and gentlemen formed the purpose of making a morning excursion to Kate's Mountain, some miles distant, the highest point of the ranges encircling the Springs, and planting upon its summit a signal banner to mark and commemorate the height of their conquest. The life and buoyancy of each spirit, freed from the formal "gaeties of the season," and revelling in the fresh splendor of the varied scenery that broke upon the view; the happy hilarity of jests, and quips, and pleasantries: the more serious *tête-à-tête* here and there, ahead or behind, in the winding mountain pathway; the glow of beauty in the toil of the ascent, and the gallantry of manly admiration; the lovely wild flowers and the grand old trees in the early autumn air; the final achievement of placing upon the tall oak of the highest peak an impromptu bunting of waving folds in

the kindled breeze; the relished refreshments, and the merry gossip about the Springs people, their courtships and their coteries; the "Mystic Circle" around the banner tree, and the *tablet of names* deposited beneath the huge rock at its base; the earnest vows, on each returning year, to repeat the pilgrimage and the ceremony; the kind words and hopes of the parting moment; the reverse picture below of the fond eyes "we left behind us," striving with strained vision and telescope to trace the progress of the pedestrians, and the burst of gladness, as the glance fell upon the waving folds of the pioneer pennon of victory; gay scenes and incidents of a gala day of innocent romance! (how bright the retrospect! how sad the perspective!)—were thought not unworthy of some special memorial, and by particular request, the duty fell upon the writer, who, with a long unpracticed hand, made an attempt in verse, the result of which was published in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, then an excellent and leading periodical of its kind, from which the accompanying reprint is made. It is but a fragment; for the idle vacation hours of a young barrister soon flew by, and on returning to business and books, the pleasing diversion, unfinished, was never resumed.

Events, which Deity alone could have foreseen, ended in the blighted hopes and broken vows of the fond dreamers who planned an annual repetition of their exhilarating adventure. The Civil War inter-



vened within less than a year, and other banners waved upon the mountain tops around the White Sulphur, and the roar of musketry and artillery replaced the sweet voices of Pleasure and of Love. Nearly the third of a century has now passed since the reverberation ceased along the astonished hills, and successive summers have seen the famous resort thronged as of old, but with new faces. Of the gay and brilliant "Mystic Circle," no recurring year ever saw again assembled any but broken and scattered links, and the lone wanderer amid the old scenes could only turn from the revels of the strangers around him, and sadly feel,—

The tender grace of a day that is dead  
Will never come back to me:

\* \* \* \* \*

Oh! for the touch of a vanished hand  
And the sound of a voice that is still!

As to some, the simple head-stone and green mound mark the last bivouac of a noble patriot soldier; others have fallen by the way in the no less noble and hopeless struggle of after life; and those who remain are *pari-antes in gurgite*. So far as known, the ladies of the party have been the most fortunate of survival, if life were a boon to those who deemed the loss of the Confederacy, of property, and of friends, the extinction of all that made life worth living, and to whom survival has been but the bitter memory of brighter days. But

to others, who suffered the same disasters and sorrows, yet who remembered that the "duties of life are greater than life itself," \* and bravely accepted the obligations of the strange and difficult situation, and have faithfully performed the same, life has, indeed, been well worth living, for it has served further to develop, in defeat and adversity, what the war had discovered and illustrated, those high and unconquerable qualities of mind and heart whose combination constitutes true nobility of soul and action.

Of such were the ladies with whom the excursion to Kate's Mountain originated, from whose Cottage it proceeded, and to which it returned, then owned and occupied by the Ritchie branch of the Virginia Harrisons, and then and still known as the Harrison Cottage. It was in miniature a reflection, as a social centre, and in its courtesies and amenities, of their historic home of Lower Brandon on-the-James, famed for its extensive, cordial and elegant hospitality, and of which the English ministers to Washington used to say that it reminded them of baronial life on the large English estates. The noted Cottage has long since passed into other hands, and Brandon itself has,

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\* These noble words commenced a letter from Mr. John C. Calhoun to the writer, then a young man at college, who had sought his advice as to the choice and pursuit of a profession. It is interesting to recall that many years afterwards General Lee said, "The sublimest word in the language is *Duty*."

of necessity, in great measure, ceased to be what it was, but the two charming and brilliant social centres of the dear past can never be dissociated in the minds of any who knew them both.

Mrs. Isabella H. Harrison, the noble Virginia matron who presided over each in season, never, it is believed, returned to the White Sulphur after the war; nor did her sister, Miss Virginia Ritchie, the life of every pleasure, and whose image in person and character, as reproduced in the poem, will be recognized by her countless friends; nor did their endeared connection and guest, Miss Sarah N. Randolph; and the queen of the Springs, the beautiful and enchanting Miss Isabelle Ritchie Harrison, the heiress and pride of Brandon, never returned but once.

As to Miss Randolph, now some years deceased, of whom the description in the poem will also be easily recognized, it is needless to say that she proved herself to be worthy of her distinguished descent by her graphic *Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*, and by the founding and successful conduct of institutions of learning of high grade for female education. These results justified the prescience which discovered in the modest young maiden high intellectual gifts, concealed by her retiring disposition from general recognition—gifts, indeed, of which she seemed to be unconscious, but of which the subsequent development demonstrated the identity of Monticello and Edge Hill.

After the war the Brandon family repaired to their ancient seat, from which they had been driven early in the conflict, and except in summer, and on special occasions, have rarely left it. But they knew from what sources they were derived, and that *noblesse oblige*, though, from sterling and righteous instincts, not needing its inspiration. Only as inseparably associated with the departed may it be permitted further to speak of the living, if indeed separation be possible, when the lives of each were so blended into one. Pardon is craved to say, that the Mother and Sister and the Daughter, in common as it were to both in mutual affection and devotion, on returning to their desecrated and desolate home, in greatly changed circumstances, did not "bate one jot of heart or hope," but nobly entered upon the duties that God had placed before them, and nobly performed them. When a great affliction came in the loss of the only male scion of the house, dearly beloved by all, and upon whom largely rested responsibility for the general welfare, it was borne with the magnanimity and resignation of Christian faith and fortitude. In adversity, in bereavement, in sickness and health, their quiet, tender devotion to each other was a benediction to all around them. For the rest, with reduced means, they endeavored to rehabilitate and make productive the fine old estates, Miss Harrison becoming familiar friends with her fields and harvests, and enjoying again the beauty

of her favorite wild flowers, afterwards to be strewn into her grave by her former slaves, then enfranchised, and always devoted to her; they helped to build up and sustain their beloved Parish Church, of which they had ever been earnest members; they extended the sweet charities and amenities of life to their neighbors, and did not forget the ancient hospitality, though it could not be greatly renewed; they relieved the poor and dependent of both races, according to their ability; together with the proprietors of the Upper Brandon estates they established and supported, long before the inauguration of the public school system in the State, a school for the children of their colored laborers, under the management of a man of thorough education, to which Miss Harrison generously contributed more than her share, and who also herself diligently taught a class of colored Sunday scholars, a class which had been perpetuated since her childhood, and which was faithfully continued until ill health forbade the task. No wonder, therefore, upon her recent death and interment, that among the numberless tokens of sympathy and condolence received by the bereaved ones from afar and near, and from the Bishops of the Church down to the servant who had attended her at a summer resort, and among the overflowing tributes of flowers from every source in the surrounding counties and from distant cities, nothing was more pathetic and beautiful than the heartfelt

contributions of her colored Sunday pupils, deposited by themselves bouquet after bouquet into the floral vault prepared by loving hands for the mortal remains. Of such Christian consecration to duty the affectionate esteem of the highest and humblest alike was the just crown and reward.

Gifted with the inheritance of great wealth, of rare beauty, of distinguished birth and position, she was always as unassuming as a well-bred child, and by the charm of her intelligence, the genial gentleness of her disposition and manners, and the honest warmth of a sympathetic heart, inspired the devoted love of her family and friends, and the sincere admiration and regard attested by the general sorrow at her demise. So earnest and noble in its aims, so humble, so pure, so tender a soul, seemed less of Earth than Heaven. In her gradual retirement from society, induced by declining health, Wordsworth's celestial violet was a fit emblem of her sweet and lovely life,—

A violet by a mossy stone,  
Half hidden from the eye:  
Fair as a star when only one  
Is shining in the sky.

JOHN HOWARD.

RICHMOND, *May* 16, 1895.

# THE MYSTIC CIRCLE OF KATE'S MOUNTAIN.

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## I.

The day had dawned all darkly o'er  
A *Sea of Mist* from shore to shore ;  
But lo! the glancing sunbeams free  
Flash far o'er all the snowy sea ;  
The rising wreaths the stars among,  
Blush back the kindling lustres long ;  
And now each bold and lofty height,  
Encircled with its crown of light,  
Rose, grandly beautiful, an isle  
Of emerald in the golden smile  
Of Morning, and the surging tide  
Of spray and splendor, wild and wide,  
Bursting upward, onward driven,  
Melts sublimely into heaven,  
And blue and boundless beamed the view  
Of rolling ridges bathed in dew.

## II.

Far o'er the circling summits high  
Kate's Mountain kissed the kindled sky,

Which shed, in love, its softest showers,  
And sunlight o'er the springing flowers,  
And forests wild, that oft had bowed,  
Yet braved at will the lightning cloud.  
The deep autumnal splendors then  
Scarce yet had purpled glade and glen;  
Rich summer glories lingered still  
On lowly vale and distant hill;  
But intermingled, here and there,  
In light and shade, the foliage fair  
Burned bright with varied tints and dyes,  
Born of the mountain breeze and skies,  
While oft the trembling leaflet fell,  
And nestled in the neighboring dell,  
And Iris softened peak and plain,  
And silver Echo rang again,  
And far o'er all the wild romance  
Of Nature's majesty, the glance  
Of pensive beauty fondly smiled,  
As mother o'er her dying child.

### III.

Such Morn, a circle bright with all  
Of woman's loveliness since the fall,  
And all of manly strength and will,  
Ascended lithely, hill o'er hill,  
Aspiring highest height to scale  
Of peaks that soared above the vale.



Too grave by half, yet calmly gay,  
A son of science led the way,  
Skilled, through years of toil, to trace  
The nearest line from place to place ;  
And quick his steady footsteps knew  
The course his practiced vision drew.  
All honor to the mind and heart  
That dares to do the nobler part ;  
All honor to the brave, strong will,  
That conquers, but to conquer still,  
And walks through life the steadfast way,  
O'er vales or mountains as they lay!

## IV.

Scarce sixteen summers' sunlit joy  
Had brightened o'er the manly boy  
That leaped and laughed along his side,  
And waked the mountain echoes wide.  
Yet, look upon that noble brow  
And beaming eye, and tell me now  
If father's fondest pride or love  
Could ask of God, in heaven above,  
To set a seal of promise there  
Aught brighter than the vision fair!  
Following after, flowers in hand,  
A little fairy, bright and bland,  
Whose pure, sweet face of love and light  
That manly boy would claim the right,

If now but half the truth were known,  
To love and cherish as his own!  
And look! the tender, fresh surprise  
That sparkles in her dear blue eyes,  
And, rippling, blushes o'er her face,  
As Georgie caught that glance of grace!

## V.

Oh! fancy now, alighted here,  
To gild and grace this earthly sphere,  
A being bright with all the love  
And loveliness that beams above,  
With aspirations pure and good,  
With feelings true of womanhood,  
With human hopes and sympathies,  
With sweet and tender charities,  
With noble instincts, noble thought,  
With all a lover's dream had sought.  
Sincere, though humble, patient, kind,  
An earnest heart, an honest mind,  
Alike disdaining pride and pelf,  
Thoughtful of all, except herself,—  
Oh! born, by being blessed, to bless,  
And find her own in others' happiness!  
To watch, to pray, to soothe, to cheer,  
Yield joy for joy, and tear for tear,  
And still her secret hope and aim  
The world should never breathe her name—

Her life, a living incense given,  
Of bright devotion's faith to Heaven!  
And yet—and yet—so good, so pure,  
Behold her gifted, half demure,  
Quaint humour, move the gravest face  
To laughter in the gravest place!  
Of home, the gladness, grace and pride,  
Beloved by all the world beside,  
'Tis hers to beam a halo gay  
Of brightness o'er the darkest day;  
Kind words, kind ways, for those or these,  
Most pleased, when most she seems to please!  
Hers, too, to win, inspire, enchain,  
Like other fair, the sighing train;  
But yet, unlike the rest, to blend  
And lose the lover in the friend,  
Weep o'er the wounds her charms impart,  
And blighting hope, still keep the heart.\*

## VI.

Beside her moved a manly form  
With all the glow of genius warm,  
A gallant and a noble youth,  
Whose gaze was but the glance of truth;  
For never in a human face

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\* Could any one who ever knew her fail to see that this was Miss Virginia Ritchie?

Had Nature left a nobler trace,  
And never shone in human eye,  
A soul more pure or spirit high.  
The thought that lighted up each look,  
Each beam of that illumined book,  
Revealed all quickly to the view,  
The mind and feelings, bright and true,  
And told, ere spoke the glowing word,  
Whate'er his inmost bosom stirred.

## VII.

Next came the maid of classic name  
And beauty, known to love and fame,  
With step elastic as the fawn  
O'er the mountain dew at dawn.  
The morning bloom at "Cottage One,"  
Not lovelier than to look upon,  
Nor sweetest wild flower, meekly blown,  
Along the mountain pathway lone.  
She came as comes the dancing light  
On purpling hills, and rapture bright  
Beamed life and laughter from her face  
And form of loveliness and grace.  
Nor purer glowed Auroral flush  
Of sunlight in its sweetest blush,  
Than glowed her soul with thoughts that stirred  
The heart, by lightest smile, or word.  
Nor loftier rose the mountain high

Beyond the cloudlets of the sky,  
Than rose that soul, in thought sublime.  
Above the paltry things of time,—  
Rose, brightly pure, in innocence—  
Majestic in its Faith intense—  
Amid, and yet above the world,  
With waiting wings for Heaven unfurled!\*

## VIII.

Of kindred blood and kindred heart,  
The queen of every grace and art,  
Where now is she, of womanhood,  
The beautiful, the true and good,  
Maid of the sunny clime and soul,  
Whose accents through you sweetly stole?  
Tell me not of the tender tone  
Of lovers when FIRST LOVE is known;  
Tell me not of the melody  
Of Bulbul's sweetest minstrelsy;  
Tell me not of the music high

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\* "Cottage One," at which "morning glories" bloomed, was the first in "Florida Row," some distance from the Harrison Cottage, which was the first in the "Baltimore Row," but of which the respective owners were the kindest of friends. It has been more than thirty years since the writer last saw this sweet lady, but he has ever remembered her with sincere regard, and is glad to believe that the aforesaid wings are still in waiting plume for their destined flight.

Of spheres or seraphs in the sky ;  
Give me those accents, soft and low,  
Wherein her thoughts and feelings flow,  
That voice of silver sweetness still,  
The heart responsive to its thrill—  
Oh, soft and low, yet brightly clear,  
And plaintive as the pleading tear!  
Far, far away, now lights the sun,  
His glories o'er that gifted one,  
And meets, in beaming eye and cheek,  
The bloom and brightness which bespeak  
His own enriching radiance, less  
Than Nature's noble loveliness.  
And friendship long must weep the day  
Its fondest treasure fled away :  
But time, nor distance, cannot steal  
Her image from the heart's own seal,  
Where spite the fatal flight of years,  
Its hopes and sorrows, joys and tears,  
Traced clear in lines of living light,  
Will lingering glow, all pure and bright,  
The form, the face, the soul, the air—  
Her lover's rapture, and despair!

## IX.

Sedate, though sportive, thoughtful still,  
Behold the bright flower of Edgehill—  
Fair daughter of an ancient line,

Of name immortal, race divine!  
Sunlight, the circuit of the suns,  
Genius, though generations runs,  
Touch but a topic, small or great  
Of town, or country, Church or State,  
The quiet radiance of that eye  
Which nought unfathomed glances by,  
Enkindles into graceful glow,  
And words of wisdom fitly flow,  
Sparkling in wit, or humor bright,  
Or bursting into bolder light,  
Till thought and fancy, once awoke,  
Ancestral splendor in her spoke!

## X.

Oh, fain for pencil bright to trace  
Yon faultless form of native grace!  
Oh, fain for heaven's own light to twine  
Its living lustres in the line,  
That dares the aspiration high,  
And yet despairs, to speak that eye,  
Whose deep, soft splendor fills and fires  
The heart, its gladness first inspires;  
The glancing gladness of that smile,  
Unconscious still of aught the while  
Of beauty, genius, goodness, love,  
In blended brightness from above!  
All needless her sweet name to tell;  
The soul in silence owns its spell,  
And fondly worships fairest Belle!

Entered into rest April 19, 1895.



## XI.

See now in bloom as fair a flower  
As blushed in Eden's early bower ;  
Oh, see that sweet and noble brow !  
The halo of a holy vow,  
Still beaming o'er its light the while,  
And blending with the queenly smile  
That breaks and brightens o'er her face  
As thoughts their pure impressions trace !  
Though stately, modest, still her own  
Sweet dignity in all things shone ;  
So gentle, pure, so tender, kind,  
Faultless, to faults of others blind ;  
A heart all open to the call  
Of charity and good-will to all,  
Attempered to the finer sense  
Of feeling, delicate, intense,  
While oft the filling tear may tell,  
The eye but speaks the heart too well ;  
And yet a spirit high, and strong,  
To bear the ill, or brave the wrong,  
And firm as Faith, and Truth and Love,  
To aught its Duty dare approve,

Oh! turn from gem, or flower, or star,  
That blooms or beams in heaven afar,  
And see in soul-lit beauty bright  
The famed Laburnum's grace and light!\*

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\* If, in any case, a more special reference to the living could be forgiven, it would be to this lovely and noble woman, a very dear friend, whose after life, as wife and mother, has perfectly illustrated the truthfulness of the above portraiture, and thus converted her bright promise into actual and beautiful realities,—a consummation, that, even in her, would have been incredible to a dry old lawyer, had he not the happiness to know a like life, the light and delight of his own.



